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SUBJECT: IRANIAN INSIDER CLAIMS AHMADINEJAD IS LOSING SUPPORT

CLASSIFIED BY: Jillian L. Burns, Director, Iran Regional
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REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(S/NF) Summary: A former high-ranking Iranian official indicated his belief that President Ahmadinejad's influence was on the decline in Iran and that he had alienated high level clerics, IRGC leadership, and the Majles. The contact maintained that the US should calibrate its pressure on Iran so as not to be a tool in the president's hand to squelch opposition. At the same time, the contact thought dialogue now with Iran would only boost Ahmadinejad's waning prospects. He alleged that "real change" in Iran would occur within a year. The former official said Iran was very sensitive about the IRPO and US "soft power," which should be viewed as a sign of success. Despite the possibility that some of his comments were self-serving, we agree the December 15 elections will be a barometer of Ahmadinejad's support in Iran. End summary.

2.(S/NF) A former high-ranking official in the Iranian Ministry of Affairs indicated in a December 14 meeting with IRPOffs that he was not optimistic about any Iranian compromise in the near term on the nuclear issue. He believes that President Ahmadinejad -- unlike Supreme Council for National Security (SCNS) head Larijani or IRGC Commander Safavi -- wants to build a nuclear bomb, to have the legacy of accomplishing this feat for Iran. However, he felt Ahmadinejad was losing support, and that the December 15 elections would be an indicator of this. (The contact's views on the December 15 elections to be reported septel.)

Ahmadinejad on the descent

3.(S/NF) The former official, most closely aligned with reformers and with Expediency Council head Rafsanjani but with wide ties in Iranian power circles, claimed Ahmadinejad is increasingly unpopular in Iran. The president has passed his zenith, he maintained, and is now on the decline. Intellectuals never supported him, but now clerics, the IRGC, and the Majles are also against him. He claimed former President Khatami, former Majles speaker Karroubi, and Expediency Council head Rafsanjani are coordinating in opposition to the president. The Basij, however, still support the president, because he doles out payments to them.

4.(S/NF) The former official, whose relative is a high level cleric, claimed that Ahmadinejad has alienated the clerics,

particularly the sources of emulation, although the contact did not go into detail how. He claimed that Ahmadinejad sent Majles Speaker Haddad-Adel to Qom to request a meeting for him with Grand Ayatollah Lankarani, but got a negative response. By contrast, Rafsanjani still has good relations with Qom.

5.(S/NF) The contact, who claims a friendship with IRGC Commander Yahya Rahim Safavi, says the IRGC leadership no longer supports the president, despite Ahmadinejad's distribution of largesse among the IRGC. The source claimed that the leadership of the IRGC is fundamentally pragmatic, and the officials are worried about Ahmadinejad's aggressive posturing. The contact said he recently gave a presentation at the IRGC's PhD program including a map showing that the US has a military presence in 12 out of 15 countries around Iran. He claimed Safavi took the slide to Ahmadinejad as a warning. The president instead hailed it as an opportunity, providing Iran more targets for asymmetrical warfare. The former official said that Ahmadinejad falsely believes that the US is a declining empire that can be defeated by Iran.

6.(S/NF) The former official said that the Majles has also turned against Ahmadinejad. He claimed that the Majles recently passed a bill to fingerprint US visitors solely because the president opposed it. He claimed that the president has to choose ministers from among the Majles in order to get them approved. He also said the Majles recently summoned Ahmadinejad for questioning because they believe he is veering off the five-year development plan, and because they want to question him about his development projects. The former official also named a number of conservative Majles members who supported Ahmadinejad in the presidential election, but later criticized him, such as Imad Afrugh and Elias Naderan.

Holocaust conference

RPO DUBAI 00000020 002 OF 002

7.(S/NF) The contact, who had direct links to the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) while at the Foreign Ministry, said he was disappointed that the IPIS went forward with holding the Holocaust conference. He claimed the IPIS director put it off once, but Deputy Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mohammadi told him to go organize it so that the ministry could demonstrate its loyalty to Ahmadinejad. The former official said it was noteworthy all the people who did not attend the conference, including Hassan Ruhani, the Supreme Leader's representative to the Supreme National Security Council, Rafsanjani, considered an expert on the Palestinian issue, and Palestinian Prime Minister Haniyeh, recently in Iran. The contact said that Haniyeh had visited his university the day before the conference began. He asked Haniyeh if he were going; Haniyeh reportedly said no, this was too sensitive an issue for him.

US policy - back off and let the paper tiger fall

8.(S/NF) The former official asserted that both US intensified pressure on Iran, particularly the threat of military attack, and the rumors of potential dialogue play into Ahmadinejad's hands. He uses the tense atmosphere to restrict debate in Iran and silence critics who may fear being accused of siding with the US. The contact, with the caveat of saying that he is always in favor of diplomatic dialogue, said he thought Ahmadinejad would use an offer now of dialogue to argue internally that his aggressive strategy had been successful. In light of Ahmadinejad's "decline," now was not the time to engage Iran, in his view. He predicted significant political change in Iran within the next year, with Ahmadinejad losing power, calling it a "regime change." He thought that a strong indicator of this changing playing field would be the results of the December 15 elections. He mentioned that he had been offered a fellowship next year in the US but decided to decline it in part because others have advised him to stay around during

this critical time.

Iran on IRPO

9.(S/NF) The former official told IRPOffs that even with "500,000" US soldiers in the region, the Iranian government is most sensitive about the Iran Regional Presence Office in Dubai. He claimed that we should take it as a sign of our success. He said the IRIG is vocal about its concerns about the office and its director by name. Asked why, he said the government is very worried about US "soft power" because it is the hardest to combat. It screens emails and telephone calls to track Iranians' interactions with the US. The government used the arrest of intellectual Ramin Jahanbegloo to scare intellectuals against working with US NGO institutions. (Note: He also said Jahanbegloo told lies about a lot of people to get out of prison, including himself. Endnote) On IRPO's cultural activities, he echoed others' advice to focus US exchange programs away from political subjects to areas where there is less sensitivity, such as the sciences, to avoid jeopardizing participants.

10.(S/NF) Comment: The former official's bottom line message to the US was: don't do anything to resuscitate Ahmadinejad in his decline, either by heaping on pressure or engaging in dialogue. He did not, however, offer a way out on the nuclear issue, other than to infer that support for a weapons program would go with Ahmadinejad. We have heard rumors (or wishful thinking) of Ahmadinejad's political demise for a year, during which time he instead seemed to out-maneuver his rivals. Other contacts have claimed his popularity is still strong inside Iran as a result of his generous handouts around the country. We have also heard a similar message from other contacts that Ahmadinejad derives power from all the attention the US and the media have directed his way. While some of this contact's points seemed designed to advance a particular political agenda, including regarding Iran's alleged concern about IRPO and unwanted side-effects of US pressure, there are enough indications of a real battle going on inside the conservative ranks to warrant close examination of the December 15 election results.

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